

## **Diasporic Female Precarity and Agency in Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways***

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Sunjeev Sahota's Booker Prize shortlisted novel *The Year of the Runaways* (2015) charts, alternating with numerous flashbacks, a year in the life of three Indian men in Sheffield: Tochi, an illegal Dalit immigrant, Avtar, who enters the United Kingdom on a student visa but very much with the intention to work, and, trying to escape a shameful past, Randeep, who arrives in the country on a spouse visa resulting from a sham marriage. My essay, however, is concerned with the two female Sikh characters, Randeep's 'visa wife' Narinder and her unlikely friend Savraj, who, as we will see, are central to Sahota's preoccupation with the various forms that precarity can assume for women and the complex expressions of agency that it can spawn in a transnational context. In particular, I trace Narinder's changing relationship with her religious faith to demonstrate that the subtle exploration of female agency and defiance in the novel is intimately bound up with pressing questions of 'honour', freedom and moral responsibility in a profoundly unjust and unequal world.

### **Conceptualizing Female Precarity and Agency**

In this essay, I take female precarity as a term that encapsulates the visible manifestations of the marginal positioning of women in patriarchal societies, whereby certain women, more than others, "suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death", and are "at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection" (Butler 2010 [2009], 25-26). Through the characters of Narinder and Savraj, Sahota explores the myriad risks, constraints and challenges characterizing women's lives within the so-called public and private spheres, both in the Global South and the North.

Compared to the British-born Narinder, who belongs to an orthodox lower-middle-class immigrant family based in Croydon, the precarity experienced by Savraj is much starker. When Narinder first meets her, she is a destitute, undocumented immigrant in the UK, working as a prostitute and bearing the weight of ensuring her family's survival in India. Narinder's precarity, on the other hand, needs to be read in the context of patriarchal oppression coupled with religious orthodoxy, which also exposes her to physical violence within the family and severely limits the kind of future that she can envisage for herself. Moreover, Narinder's subordinated positioning is accentuated by her family's commitment to keeping itself, and especially its women, untouched by the mainstream culture of the

host country and even that of other immigrant communities, thereby seriously restricting her access to “institutional structures that ensure safely [*sic*], stability, income opportunities and protection” (Malreddy 2014, 14).

If *The Year of the Runaways* brings to the fore the depth and extent of female suffering, it also grapples with the intricate contours of agency, the “socially constructed capacity to act”, under conditions of economic, legal, religious and familial constraints (Barker 2012, 241). In doing so, it resolutely avoids recycling clichéd images of the “oppressed third world woman” (Chow 2005, 603) or, more specifically, of “the passive downtrodden South Asian woman” (Puwar 2003, 25). Of course, passivity and victimhood are not the only attributes that are stereotypically assigned to Indian women; Raka Ray (1999, 1-2), in her discussion of the film *Bandit Queen*, has alerted us to the “the mythic polarization of ‘the Indian Woman’ in popular imagination”, which entails her being cast as either “victim or heroine”. Sahota’s novel, on the other hand, steers clear of such Manichaeian representations. Instead, his portrayal of female agency, particularly Narinder’s, appears to echo Dissanayake’s call for recognizing agents as “shaped irreducibly by social and cultural discourses” while having “the *potentiality* to clear cultural spaces from which they can act in accordance with their desires and intentionalities” (1996, xvi; emphasis added). The word ‘potentiality’ is significant here since Sahota’s novel is as concerned with the exercise of agency resulting in concrete, dramatic acts of resistance, as it is with the timorous promise of a character being able to act in accordance with her desires, a promise which may well not be fulfilled. As we will see, rather than giving way to a triumphalist narrative which entails a simplistic victory against systemic (gendered) oppression, the novel constitutes a reflection on the “sorts of agents [that] women can be despite their subordination” (Jeffery 2001 [1999], 223). Moreover, it underscores the tensions that agentic behaviour generates within the family and between women, but also within the female subject who exercises or, seeks to exercise, agency.

### **The Girl from God**

The sixth chapter of the novel entitled “Narinder: The Girl from God” chronicles her initiation into orthodox Sikhism, her first trip with her mother as a four-year old child to a temple in Punjab for a summer of *seva*, or religious service, and the delight with which she takes to wearing the turban. We learn that both Narinder and her brother Tejpal were homeschooled, and by the time they “were eight they knew all of the sukhmani sahib”.<sup>1</sup> But while Narinder’s brother appears to have continued his

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<sup>1</sup> Sunjeev Sahota, *The Year of the Runaways* (London: Picador, 2016 [2015]): 249. Subsequent references to this edition will be given parenthetically in the text. Sukhmani sahib refers to a set of hymns that form part of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the main religious scripture of Sikhism.

education beyond the age of sixteen, is employed (outside the home) and possesses “a vast gym-trained chest” (263), Narinder’s life as a teenager and a young adult living with her father and brother largely comprises “daily shuffling between the house and the gurdwara, to reading and tidying and heating up meals, to working at the langar hall<sup>2</sup> and awaiting her turn on the harmonium” during religious hymns (259). This restricted life, in many respects and for many years, seems to have satisfied her and indeed, the novel is interspersed with passages which evocatively underscore Narinder’s feelings of mystical oneness with a divine force and the immense joy that it brings her: “It made her feel as if she was underwater, submerged deep within His love. She felt weightless, like she was gliding. The words seemed to generate inside her a different heartbeat, and behind her interlocked lashes, sunlight squandered itself across the world. Swallows swooped over copper fields. And in the penance of song she could hear His breathing.” (266) But for Narinder, “goodness is at the heart of religious practice” (Shamsie 2015), and her desire to contribute to society outside of the narrow confines of the gurdwara and to experience joys and satisfactions other than those of a spiritual nature becomes stronger as the novel progresses.

Paid employment for a woman in Narinder’s family is seen as an act dishonouring paternal authority and not befitting an orthodox Sikh. Therefore, the choices available to her are extremely limited, which becomes apparent when her father rejects her tentative request for permission to apply for a paid job, even if it is one that would have entailed working at the temple:

‘There was a poster in the gurdwara. About teaching Panjabi to some of the children after school. Do you think I might ask about it?’

‘I don’t think so, beiti<sup>3</sup>. Do you need money?’

‘No, Baba.’

‘And in one or two years you’ll be married – these are things you can discuss with your husband’.

‘As you say, Baba. Goodnight.’ (256)

One of the defining characteristics of the orthodox Sikh community depicted in the novel is submission to patriarchal authority even if, as in the case of Narinder’s father, this authority is not devoid of love. But as Narinder’s father’s just-cited words make very clear, the assumption is that, once married, she will have to surrender to yet another man’s will. Financially, she is completely dependent on her father, with the only money to which she has access lying in “a savings account her father had opened for her wedding” (268). We see Narinder turning to religion almost by default after her attempts, however unambitious, to spread her wings are thwarted. It is worth recalling, for instance, Narinder’s reaction when her father forbids her to apply for a job. As she retires to her room that evening, she “allowed

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<sup>2</sup> Langar hall refers to the area of the temple where free food is served.

<sup>3</sup> Beiti (Punjabi/Urdu/Hindi) means daughter.

herself to feel disappointed, though she knew he must be right.” (256) She puts on religious music to soothe her agitated mind. But, and it is important to point this out, she does not actively choose to play a *shabad*, or hymn; rather that is the only music allowed in the house, and she is able to recognize that “anything would have filled her mind with musical delight” (256), suggesting her awareness of, and thirst for, secular joys.

As a young adult, on one of her trips to India to serve at a temple, she becomes conscious of the unhealthy innocence bred by the constricted life that she has been made to lead, rendering her ill-equipped to survive outside the house and the gurdwara: “It was more that she felt inadequate. She felt like a child. No. She felt that the world made her feel like a child.” (278) When she turned eighteen, her father decided that “she was never to take the evening walk alone” and assigned her brother to chaperone her home from the gurdwara: “For your safety, he had said.” (263) Sahota thus provides us with an example of what bell hooks has termed “benevolent patriarchy” (2004, 113), which is patriarchal oppression couched in a language of protection, care and responsibility. As hooks explains, under the benevolent patriarchal model, “the father is the ruler who rules with tenderness and kindness, but he is still in control” (2004, 114). It is arguably this language of benevolence that makes it difficult for Narinder to first recognize that she is indeed oppressed and that she has the right to live a life that does not conform to the restrictive expectations of her family and community. Her brother’s desire to control her is more blatant as, at one point in the narrative, he tells her: ““You’re thinking. Don’t. Girls shouldn’t think.”” (263) The summer months that Narinder spends in India, away from her father and Tejpal, are shown to provide her with a modicum of freedom that is denied to her in England: “One of the best things – perhaps the very best thing – about coming to India was being able to roam, to breathe.” (277) Sahota effectively subverts the stereotypical notion that living in the Global North, as opposed to the Global South, necessarily results in greater freedom for women, and underscores how controlling patriarchal practices might become amplified within a diasporic context in the ‘semi-elected’ isolation of the immigrants who are determined to distance themselves from the wider population, much like the orthodox Pakistani-Muslim immigrant community depicted in Nadeem Aslam’s 2004 novel *Maps for Lost Lovers* (cf. Moore 2009, 6).

Narinder slowly begins to challenge patriarchal and religious authority (and the direct speech attributed to her in the narrative becomes progressively marked with questions), as she gets drawn into the secular world, following her meeting with an elderly, impoverished woman in India; she tells her about her daughter Savraj who has gone missing in England and Narinder promises to find the girl. Narinder dutifully shares with her father the details of this encounter as well as her desire to help the

woman. Her father's response is gentle but firm: he labels the woman's plight as a "police matter" and tells Narinder to not get "involved" and more generally, to not "take on all the world's troubles" (259).

Narinder's irrepressible desire to help others and her sense of responsibility clash starkly with her family's moral code which is underpinned by the idea of honour and an overwhelming concern for their reputation within the community. Narinder's insistence to help the woman trace Savraj and the support, financial and otherwise, that she later offers to her, represent, to quote Judith Butler, a "call to interdependency", underlined by her "recognition of a generalized condition of precariousness" (2010 [2009], 48). Narinder rejects "the tacit interpretive scheme that divides worthy from unworthy lives" (Butler 2010 [2009], 51), and, ironically, **her first act of resistance against her family stems from selflessness and is derived from the emphasis placed on charity in the Sikh religion**. As she later confesses to Savraj, her father and brother's reaction had provoked an unprecedented anger in her, strengthening rather than undermining her resolve to find Savraj: "'I've never been so angry. When they said what I was doing was wrong, I just wanted to scream. I wanted to shout. I've never been like that.'" (267)

### **Gendered Economic Precarity**

Savraj's illegal passage to England was organized by a transit agent in Ludhiana on the understanding that she would be employed at a factory in Newham, thus allowing her to alleviate her family's desperate poverty. It is not specified in the narrative whether Savraj ended up as a sex worker because she was brought to the UK under false pretenses and the job did not materialize, or if she left her job because of unacceptable work conditions, but what we do know for certain is that when Narinder first meets her, Savraj has not eaten in two days. She is living under abject conditions in a decrepit shed where even her most basic needs are not being met: "It was a dispiriting little room: damp, cold, unloved and unloving. Not quite enough height to stand up straight. The mattress lay on the floor, beside a dog-chewed armchair probably taken from the alley outside. No electricity. Narinder wondered how she cooked or went to the toilet." (261-262) Her deprivation is accentuated by the utter lovelessness of her existence; it belatedly occurs to Narinder that Savraj's mother had only asked Narinder to locate Savraj and to tell her to send money to the family, and that she had not expressed "fear for her daughter's safety, or concern over her welfare" (262). Narinder thus gains a closer insight into the forces underpinning the relationships within Savraj's family and the importance of money in ensuring human survival, where spiritual matters or even emotions can become a luxury. At this point in the narrative, for Narinder, help can still primarily be imagined within the context of the orthodox

Sikh community and within the space of the temple, but Savraj rejects Narinder's attempts to guide her to the local gurdwara. As Savraj is quick to point out to her, among the ostensibly devout men who frequent the gurdwara, some come to her for sexual services; moreover, she is all too aware of the kind of welcome she would receive at the gurdwara as a 'fallen' woman. Savraj also claims that she "enjoy[s]" sex work, but this assertion is followed by mirthless laughter which, rather than suggesting a genuine enjoyment of sexual labour, points to her need to disrupt Narinder's simplistic reading of her plight, as well as to her desire to reclaim some semblance of agency and not to be perceived as a passive victim (265). Moreover, when she later reveals to Narinder that she has resumed sex work after having taken up a poorly-paid cleaning job for a few months, it becomes clear that this decision was dictated, above all, by the urgent need to ensure her own and her family's survival: "'More money for less time [...]. Do you think I wanted to go back to the sheds?'" (286-287).

In her study *Live Sex Acts: Women Performing Erotic Labor*, Wendy Chapkis argues that women's voluntary participation in sex work or "consensual prostitution" often results from the exercise of rational, rather than free, choice (1997, 52). As she points out, "very few women's lives are models of 'free choice'", since "most women's 'choices' are severely limited by their disadvantaged position within hierarchical structures of sex, race and class" (Chapkis 1997, 52). In Savraj's case, her ability to exercise free choice is further hampered by the very serious ramifications of her undocumented immigrant status. Moreover, while working as a cleaner, Savraj's health and appearance continue to decline, with visible signs of aging appearing over a span of a few months (270). Savraj is "unconvinced" that the cleaning job is "so much better" than prostitution, as Narinder insists it is, underscoring a fundamental lack of understanding and communication between the two women (270). Through Savraj's refusal to idealize her work as a cleaner, *The Year of the Runaways* compels us to address uncomfortable truths not only about the sex work carried out by illegal immigrants, but also about other types of precarious work which Narinder considers more respectable but which appear to be no less damaging to the immigrant's physical and emotional well-being. It is surely no coincidence that Savraj's new job consists of performing cleaning tasks for a former client as it reveals the suffocating continuities between various forms of degrading labour, and highlights her complete lack of say in the matter; indeed, as the novel brings to the fore, illegal female immigrants like her cannot "draw boundaries or refuse work they find demeaning" (Anderson 2003, 113).

Abandoned by her family, alone and living illegally, Savraj wonders about the ultimate good that providing help to others brings about:

'I don't see what's so good about helping others, though. If they only become reliant on you. Then you're just part of the problem.'

‘But we have to help,’ Narinder insisted. ‘I couldn’t live with myself if I just walked away. I know how people can do that.’ (264)

Driven by desperation, Savraj does accept Narinder’s assistance, in particular the food that she starts bringing for her on a regular basis, and even asks her for money, but Savraj complicates Narinder’s narrative of help and support, particularly when offered by a collective whose identity is defined in terms of religion. When Narinder tries to reassure her by saying, “God will find us a way”, a tearful Savraj responds with despair-laden anger, “There is no way” (271), and is scornful of Narinder’s attempts to turn her into one of her “turbanwallis”, as Savraj pejoratively refers to orthodox, turban-donning Sikh women (263).

### **Religious Faith, Honour and Moral Responsibility**

Indeed, an indication of Narinder’s increasingly complicated relationship with her faith is the way in which the turban takes on contradictory connotations for her and she begins to think of God in terms that are not necessarily tied in with the symbols of orthodox Sikhism: “It was strange how unprotected, fearful even, she felt without her turban during the day, but how much closer to Him she felt without it at night. She didn’t understand it.” (271) This slow shift in her perception also becomes apparent when she brings a gift for Savraj, which instead of a “gutka”, a book of hymns from Sikh Scriptures, as Savraj suspects, is a flashy red lipstick (264).

In helping Savraj against her family’s wishes, Narinder will come face to face with the possibility of violence being inflicted on her by her own brother. In one scene, when she refuses to pay heed to his warnings about seeing Savraj, whom he labels a ‘whore’ (266), mingling intimidation with emotional blackmail, Tejpal warns her: ““See her again and I’ll really do something.”” Then, yanking her by the elbow, he reminds her in no uncertain terms: ““Your duty is to uphold our name. Mine is to protect it.”” His face softened and his hand moved to her cheek. ‘Don’t force me into doing something I don’t want to.’” (268) Sahota thus draws our attention to the existence of ‘honour’-based violence within this orthodox diasporic community: as Gill and Brah explain, ‘honour’-based violence encompasses any form of violence perpetrated against women within a framework of patriarchal family and social structures (2014, 72-73). The main justification for the perpetration of this kind of violence is the protection of a value system predicated on norms and traditions concerned with ‘honour’ and it manifests itself in the form of physical, emotional and psychological abuse. **The notion of honour is interlinked with the idea of shame where the former relates to the “behaviour expected of members of a particular community”, while the latter (shame) is associated with “transgressions against these expectations” (Gill and Brah 2014, 74).** Women, according to Gill and Brah, “play a particularly

important role in the maintenance of honour” (2014, 74). Narinder has grown up with the importance of both ‘honour’ and ‘shame’ instilled in her and vividly recalls, for instance, an uncle who “cut a razor blade across his wrists because his daughter had run off with a Muslim boy. [...] Most parents whose daughters had strayed lived with their aura of shame, and everyone else gave them a wide berth, as if they really did stink of shit.” (283) As we see later, Narinder will find it far more difficult to free herself of the shackles of an ‘honour’-based moral code and the sense of duty based on it, than of the demands of the Sikh faith.

Narinder discovers that Savraj and her brother Kavi lied to her about their mother having cancer, and that they wanted to manipulate her into marrying Kavi so that he could migrate to the United Kingdom and escape a life of destitution in India. Sahota’s nuanced portrayal of precarity also sheds light on how one subaltern group may in turn discriminate against other subaltern groups. For instance, we see Kavi demean lower-caste women whom he considers as being innately inferior to himself, and to women belonging to his caste, and therefore entirely expendable, serving the sole purpose of satisfying his libido: “[S]he’s just one of the chamaars<sup>4</sup>. She gets passed around. I’d never treat one of our own girls like that” (281). Savraj, too, is deeply hostile towards “chamaars”, who she sees as receiving preferential treatment in the form of a quota system which “is an attempt by the central government to remedy injustices related to low-caste status” (*Hidden Apartheid* 2007, 39), and she holds them partly responsible for her family’s financial woes: “There are no jobs. There is only corruption. Or if there are jobs they go to the fucking chamaars with these government quotas.” (287)<sup>5</sup> Studies show that the “reservation policy has not been uniformly implemented by various state governments” in India and, while some improvement in their life chances has taken place, “Dalits are still oppressed and marginalized, especially in villages, where they are economically dependent on upper-caste groups” (Mahalingam 2007, 50). Savraj’s lack of compassion for and antagonism towards the Dalits, who have endured centuries of oppression and discrimination, and her brother’s sexual exploitation of lower-caste women complicate our sympathy, as well as Narinder’s, for these characters and our reading of them as victims, but do not negate Savraj and Kavi’s very real suffering. When Kavi begs Narinder to become his visa wife, his words are laden with desperation and hopelessness: “We

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<sup>4</sup> “Chamaar”(also spelt “chamar”) is “a *Dalit* sub-caste associated with leatherwork”; this term, which carries highly derogatory connotations, is used to refer to “a person of low-caste” and its derivative “chamariya” also functions as a generalized insult (Pelly 2008, xiii).

<sup>5</sup> “To allow for proportional representation in certain state and federal institutions, the constitution reserves 22.5 percent of seats in federal government jobs, state legislatures, the lower house of parliament, and educational institutions for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes”; *Hidden Apartheid* 2007, 39 n.103.



can't make anything of ourselves here. Land rents keep going up. Rates are going down. Nothing's growing. It's impossible. I'd be forever in your debt.'" (281) And, as Savraj later informs Narinder, Kavi even considered "selling his organs" to survive (287). However, deeply repulsed by their earlier attempts to manipulate her by lying about their mother's health, Narinder distances herself from Savraj and Kavi's family. Savraj reappears in the narrative on one more occasion to share the news of her brother's horrifying death. Her vanishing from Narinder's life and from the narrative underscores the precarity of what the narrator of Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* has called the "shadow class" consisting of illegal immigrants who are "condemned to movement" (2006, 102). It also underscores the limitations of solidarity between women, as Narinder and Savraj struggle to come to terms with the respective challenges facing them, with questions of communal/familial honour and religious duty vying in importance with the imperatives of basic survival.

Narinder is racked with guilt upon learning that Kavi suffocated to death alongside two other men while attempting to illegally make his way to Europe, "[h]iding in a gap cut into the ceiling" of a coach (291). This guilt drives her to an act of extraordinary kindness: she wilfully seeks out, through an Indian lawyer, a young man looking to escape to the UK, which is how she becomes Randeep's visa wife. Sahota has called Narinder "the moral heart of the book" (2016) and we see how her British nationality, rather than her faith as she had initially thought, will emerge as her most valuable resource that she can put to the service of others. Indeed, the idea of "responsibility across borders", to borrow Iris Marion Young's terminology, keenly informs Narinder's sense of "political responsibility" (2013, 123). **Narinder's resistance is underpinned by the idea of 'responsibility across borders'.** As Kamila Shamsie has noted, "the question of the responsibilities borne by the citizens of the more fortunate nations of the world towards those from other countries" is integral to Narinder's story, but it is a story that "is told in the most intimate of ways, as an issue that is not theorised but deeply felt" (2015). Narinder's moral code is dictated, instinctively it seems, by the notion of equality which she will find increasingly hard to reconcile with her faith which rests on a blind acceptance of and submission to a God who allows inequalities to exist and who "make[s] people suffer" (272). But her friendship with Savraj and Kavi's tragic death bring in their wake a vivid shift in how Narinder responds to the needs of others. Though she is not as yet able to abandon the Sikh religion, she becomes increasingly conscious of the dangers of the kind of certainty it had cultivated in her, and "what had at one time seemed clear was now a confusing grey" (391).

In entering into a sham marriage and secretly leaving home to live in Sheffield, Narinder initially postpones her arranged marriage. The sham marriage is a testament to her moral resolve to help others

and also brings sharply into focus the degree to which her life had been confined. Moreover, coming into close proximity to the three illegal immigrants, especially Tochi, will compel her to confront the sheer magnitude of human suffering. While Narinder herself is oppressed as a direct consequence of the “chauvinistic requirements of her family” (Charles 2016), her time in Sheffield more keenly attunes her to the anguish of both men and women: “She thought of Tochi’s face, of Randeep’s, of Avtar lying in hospital. Who would be a man, she thought, in a world like this.” (455) The year in Sheffield also allows her to acquire certain skills which, as a woman, her family had not thought it necessary for her to develop: it is also now that she learns to swim and change lightbulbs, and for the first time in her life, she applies for a job that entails working outside of the home and the gurdwara. Her joy at being accepted for a part-time job at the neighbourhood library is short-lived, however, as she is forcefully removed from the flat by her brother and relatives and taken back to Croydon. When Narinder leaves home again to return to Sheffield, she does not do so surreptitiously and instead confronts her father in words which are at once defiant and beseeching:

‘I’m going, Baba,’ she said. ‘I won’t let you stop me.’ She felt the words rushing up her throat. ‘Why can’t you give me this? All I wanted was one year. A few months now. Why can’t you give me that? I’ve given my whole life to you. For you. I’ve thrown my life aside so you can walk with your head held high and you can’t even give me this? How is that right? How is that fair?’ (400)

Her father does not prevent her from leaving and offers her financial support, but he clearly perceives giving her permission to leave as an immense sacrifice which jeopardizes his ‘honour’. He even removes his turban and places it at her feet: “A tear rolled down his cheek. ‘A Sikh’s honour lies in his children and in the pugri<sup>6</sup> on his head. Don’t step on my honour, beita.’” (401) Historically the turban in South Asia, among Hindu as well as Muslim and Sikh men, has been a symbol of honour but since the twentieth century it has become, as Nikky-Guninder Singh points out, “the critical symbol of Sikhism” (2011, 188). Narinder is acutely aware of the capitulation that this gesture signifies, not just in cultural and religious terms, but also with respect to her father’s identity as a man. As we will see below, this gesture comes back to haunt her when she finds herself falling in love with Tochi.

Her inability to accept societal hierarchies that designate certain groups of human beings as inherently inferior to others makes her acutely sensitive to the mistreatment meted out to Tochi, a Dalit, not only in caste-ridden India but also by the diasporic Indian community in Britain. She is unable to connect the image of “Tochi being forced to eat some blank-faced master’s leftovers” with “some idea she’d always held of His goodness. She couldn’t do it.” (392). Narinder’s growing ability to question

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<sup>6</sup> Pugri (Punjabi/Urdu/Hindi) means turban.

long-held religious beliefs as well as her “progress, from the very limited horizons for an obedient young woman to a greater sense of herself as an active participant in her destiny” is reminiscent, as Alice O’Keefe has also noted, of the shift in perception that comes about in Nazneen, the Bangladeshi female immigrant protagonist of Monica Ali’s 2003 novel *Brick Lane* (2015). In one of the most poignant scenes in Sahota’s novel, the narrator charts in detail the precise moment when Narinder, who had been struggling to remain a believer in the face of endless human suffering, finally and irrevocably loses her belief in God, and actively rids herself of the visible markers of her faith. After Tochi shares with her details of the breathtaking brutality to which he and his family were subjected because of his caste positioning, of how he was set on fire, his pregnant sister’s stomach knifed open, his fifteen-year old brother’s testicles cut off, and his parents’ bodies so badly mutilated that they could not be told apart, Narinder removes her turban and unties her hair. It is a gesture that functions as a visible enactment of her dramatic loss of faith in divine goodness:

She raised her fingers to her head, to her turban. She lifted it off and put it on the table. She eased out the hairpin down by her neck and placed that on the table too. And then the pin above that, and then pin after pin and clip after clip and all the while her hair was coming down in ribbons, loosening, uncoiling, falling. [...] She stared at him, her arms arranged over her chest as if she were naked. [...] He felt her hands lightly touch him and they both wept for all they had lost. (433)

The succession of verbs (“raised”, “lifted”, “put”, “eased” and “placed”) in the first three sentences of the excerpt underscore the sense of purpose and determination underpinning her actions, suggesting Narinder’s heightened awareness of her own agency. Moreover, the flowing rhythm of the passage as a whole lends a ritualistic quality to the act of removing the turban and freeing her hair; it brings to the fore not only her solemn rejection of beliefs that had defined her sense of morality since childhood, but also the depth of her feelings for Tochi.

Tochi’s love and his very presence now produce in Narinder the same feeling of serenity and joy that in the past she had so strongly associated with the confines of the temple: “she heard him moving about upstairs and there was a sudden feeling inside her of being safe. It was a feeling she recognized. It was the same feeling she used to get inside the gurdwara.” (422) But, as O’Keefe points out, Narinder’s “journey of personal liberation”, unlike Nazneen’s in *Brick Lane*, “is tempered by a recognition of the powerful bonds of tradition and family” and, more broadly, with the deeply entrenched idea of honour and her sense of duty towards her father (2015). While she yearns desperately to build a life with Tochi, and even though she is now able to dissociate morality from religious faith, given the implications of his ‘untouchable’ status within the deeply casteist community

in which her father is so deeply anchored, Narinder is unable to bring herself to stay with him: “He was begging for her to be with him and she knew that he loved her. All she had to do was take this chance that had been so delicately brought before her, on cupped palms. [...] But below the cupped palms lay her baba’s turban, on the floor and at her feet. She saw what her being with Tochi would do to him, the lifetime of disgrace.” (440) Her being with Tochi, she knows, would not only destroy her father’s standing within the community, but also shatter his very sense of self. As we saw earlier, in focusing on the suffering of others, Narinder becomes acutely conscious of the flaws in religious logic which requires believers to accept instances of appalling injustice as part of God’s will, but by situating the needs of others at the heart of goodness and morality, Narinder subscribes to what Erich Fromm has described as “the doctrine that love for oneself is identical with ‘selfishness’ and that it is an alternative to love for others” (2014 [1947], 127-128). She finds herself incapable of paying heed to Tochi’s exhortation to not hurt herself in attempting to ensure that “other people aren’t hurt” (440). When we meet Narinder next in the epilogue, which is set ten years after she lost her faith and left Tochi to return to her family, we learn that she ended her arranged engagement and, though her father never forgave her, she nursed him devotedly till he died. In the final pages of the novel, Narinder returns to India, not to perform *seva* as she had fervently done in the past, but in deference to her father’s wishes, to scatter his ashes in Kiratpur. She spontaneously makes her way to Thiruvananthapuram, a town that Tochi had dreamt of visiting, and sees him there with his wife and children. The two do not meet and the novel ends with Narinder travelling back to England. Indeed, in wanting to live what she considers to be a moral life, and in conflating her dedication to making “the lives of others bearable” with abnegation, Narinder necessarily and devastatingly banishes the possibility of her own happiness (Butler 2004, 17).

Narinder’s agency is evident from the fact that, with her help, Randeep ultimately succeeds in becoming a legal immigrant and that, by the end of the narrative, she does acquire a degree of assertiveness vis-à-vis her family, which she displays through her continued rejection of religion and through her decision to live as a single woman, despite her father’s disapprobation. However, as the preceding discussion illustrates, her agentic subjecthood does not signal a victory over and freedom from female precarity, with neither Narinder nor the narrator being able to offer any solutions to Savraj’s terrible plight. Savraj’s vanishing from Narinder’s life, and from the narrative, is a powerful reminder of the vicious tenacity of some forms of precarity which resist being overcome in an individual’s life. Moreover, Narinder’s agency emerges as a tragic paradox: while her rebellious actions against her family and the laws of the land are fuelled by a self-imposed exacting moral code

that recognizes and seeks to redress the precarity of others, it is this very moral code that will compel her to reject Tochi's tender offer of love and to thus surrender her emotional freedom.

## Acknowledgements

This publication is supported by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

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